

## “GLASS SLIPPERS WERE NEVER MADE FOR DANCING” \*

*The Verandah Poems*, **Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze**, Bloodaxe Books, 2016. £9.95 ISBN 978-1-7803728-5-3

*Not in This World*, **Tracey Herd**, Bloodaxe Books, 2015. £9.95 ISBN 978-1-8522489-4-9

*Tongulish*, **Rita Ann Higgins**, Bloodaxe Books, 2016. £9.95 ISBN 978-1-7803730-3-4

\* from *Reverie* (Tracey Herd, *Not in This World*)

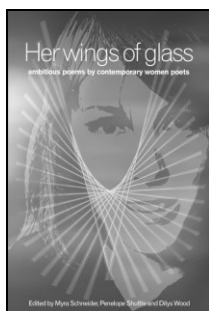
‘Verandahs matter’, Kei Miller writes in his Foreword to **Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’s** enticing new collection. He describes them memorably as tongues jutting out from the mouths of houses, places where people come together to exchange stories about their lives ‘with ... care, with ... empathy, and with ... insight’. *The Verandah Poems* (gorgeously illustrated with photographs by Tehron Royes) radiate outwards from this one key place, as Breeze chats with neighbours, family, and strangers, and watches the happenings around her, from the blackbirds singing in her mango tree (*Tweet Tweet*) to the hot young men who raise the roof on her sister’s house (“I thought I had died / and gone to man heaven”, *The Casting of the Roof*). Verandahs may be deeply embedded in Jamaican culture, but the world they look out on is changing, both societally and personally. A troubling episode in which “the madman / who prowls the street at day” throws stones at a young girl, an under-age ‘gogo dancer’, prompts a skewing of perspective: now “the verandah feels unsafe” and “I retreat to my bed / making sure / to lock the door” (*Locking the Door*). More light-heartedly, the young men who once scorned childcare as women’s work now “carry babies / precious dear things / trembling on their chests” – “in fact / the rasta man / across the road / does all of this / and even dyes his hair” (*New Men*). And the poet acknowledges that the very fact that she is now content to sit on her verandah is a marker of her age: in contrast, her children jet across continents – although the new technology they introduce her to also becomes a metaphor for extended intimacy (“It is a smartphone, Mum / she say / Just touch / don’t be afraid to touch”, *Presents*).

The individuals in *Not in This World* find themselves in a colder universe. **Tracey Herd** describes characters who live on the edge, suffering severe depression, abandonment, neglect. In contrast to Breeze’s easy-spun conversations, these are poems that demand high emotional investment – and sometimes recourse to Google to discover back-stories. Several poems interrogate the blurring of identity between female film stars and their iconic roles – between Vivien Leigh and Scarlett O’Hara, for instance (“Strange to be fixed as one dazzling image / when her soul was in darkness, losing its way”, *Vivien and Scarlett*), or Joan Fontaine and the character she plays in *Rebecca*. Images of ice, fire, crystal, and mirrors evoke the glamour of this world, but also its potential shattering and its complicity with pain and destruction. Even the apparently fortunate can be struck down by random tragedy, exemplified in the coin-toss which decided who would board Buddy Holly’s plane on its doomed flight. For me, the most memorable poems in an outstanding collection were the elegies for lives cut short – for the writer Marina Keegan, killed in a car crash at the age of 22 (“Your words couldn’t protect you, / but they never left you, / swirling around your body like moths”, *Calling Card*), or for the peerless Ruffian, the racehorse born to run, who could not be stopped even when she snapped a leg in her last race: “You were buried close to where you finally stumbled to a halt, / your ebony nose pointed towards the finish line / in the infield at Belmont Park. ... Farewell, fierce girl” (*Ruffian*).

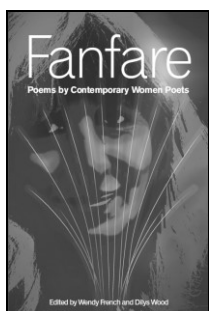
**Rita Ann Higgins’s** *Tongulish* takes words on a dance. Several of her speakers use language to confuse others, or just to avoid thinking clearly themselves, and she skewers their idiocies while also delighting in the opportunities for high-wire linguistic play that they provide. From the pretentious waiter who “started talking in bauble” (*The Waiter*), to the airport official with his blinkered recital of the rules (*Cryanair*), to the chorus of biddies who “ahhhed the day away” (“and God help us was never far behind”, *The Odd Wasp*), no one is safe from her penetrating wit. Higgins’s lines fizz with energy, and a commitment to truthfulness that leavens even tragic events, such as a suicide in the family, with the sharpness of close observation (“You were in the hold, / in your new suit, / your

designer shirt, / your best shoes. / We forgot your socks”, *The Mission*). And she also celebrates overlooked lives, such as the women in *Testimony*, who, while the (male) ‘silver poets’ were hymning an idealized icon, – a ‘dark Rosaleen’ – were ‘poeming’ themselves, “not with aislings or needles / but with tongue”. Many of the poems are wordy in the best sense, picking up snippets of speech and running with them, but Higgins can do brevity just as well, as in the sublimely caustic *Guess What*, in which a politician admits to throwing “billions at the roads”: “We meant to throw it / at the health service. // We did try / and we did throw, / but guess what! / we did miss.”

**Dorothy Yamamoto**



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